

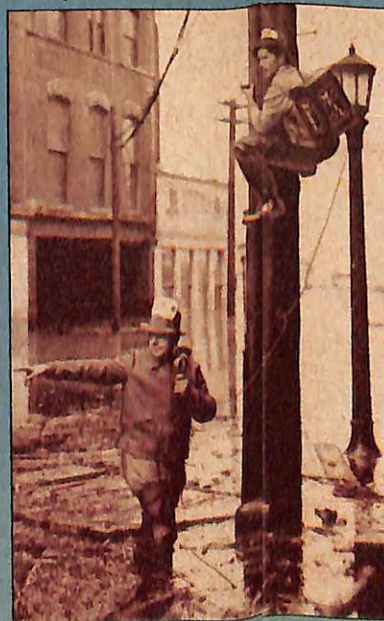


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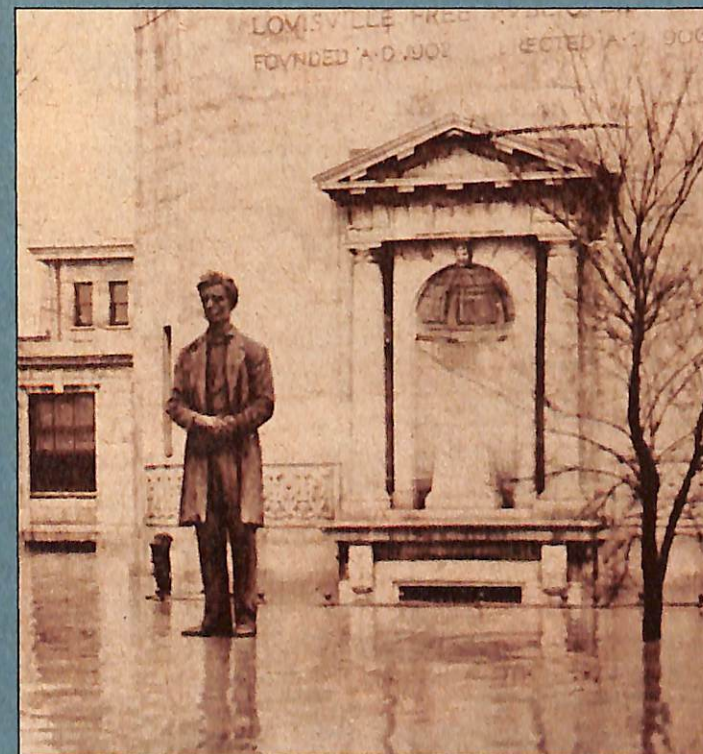


H. Harold Davis

Broadway east of Brook Street became a canoeing stream for Theodore Neb, above. The pontoon bridge at left linked downtown and the Highlands and was supported by whiskey barrels. It was the brainstorm of Jake Britt, a mechanic with the fire department, who recalls that city officials first rejected the idea. Bridging the information gap during much of the flood was the job of radio reporters like Pete Monroe and Foster Brooks, on the pole, today a well-known comedian. Their equipment was borrowed from a Philadelphia station.



George Bailey



After the flood cut off power, *Courier-Journal* reporters and editors, top, had to work by kerosene lamps to get the newspaper out. Not so mortal was the statue of Abraham Lincoln, which appeared to be walking, or at least standing, on water in front of the Louisville Free Public Library on York Street.

But the flood was no respecter of prejudice. If it destroyed businesses and wrecked houses, it also threw together racial and ethnic groups that seldom associated. The irony of that was not lost on some. "This flood was where the rich and poor met together," wrote an anonymous correspondent in *The Louisville Defender*. "The Negroes and whites were met together as one family. Before the flood the [white] people drove you and me from their door; they drew a color line; but thanks to God when the flood reached

The weather had been strange for months before the great flood. The summer of 1936 was one of record-breaking heat and drought, with week after week of temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Nineteen people died in Louisville alone. Crops withered and blew away.

In December, the city was covered with a mysterious cloud of polluted air, much of it probably caused by coal-burning furnaces. The choking, eye-burning smog stayed for weeks.

But all of that was a prelude. The new year began. Then the rain started. It poured down, all along the Ohio Valley, 19 inches of it in Louisville.

Disaster came in three phases. Heavy rain between Jan. 9 and 15 pushed the Ohio to a crest of 30 feet, two feet above flood stage. A second bout of continuous rain between Jan. 17 and 23 pushed the river above the previous record of 46.7 feet, set in 1884. Toward the end of that second phase, freezing temperatures produced sleet and rain. Then came the knockout punch. On Jan. 24, "Black Sunday," heavy rain resumed. Falling on ice-covered ground, it couldn't be absorbed, and it pushed the river to a crest of 57.1 feet, reached on Wednesday, Jan. 27.



Al Blunk

Police from Philadelphia and Boston aided flood victims.

Louisville, the Lord broke that line of hate until the water fell."

With each decade, the witnesses have grown fewer. This 50th anniversary is perhaps the last milestone in which those who were adults during the flood will be able to tell us what they saw and felt.

They will never forget the utter strangeness of what they lived through. "I saw a cabin cruiser pass through narrow York Street at Second," wrote Virginia Emrich. "By the time I reached First and Broadway, it was steaming up Broadway followed by other power boats. What a sight to behold, a lake cruiser plying up Broadway!"

At its crest, the river was 3.9 feet deep at Fourth and Broadway, 6½ feet at First and Kentucky, 10 feet at Court and Spring in Jeffersonville, Ind., 12.4 feet at 40th and Broadway, and 20 feet at the Portland Canal. Boats glided in and out of the ground floor of the Brown Hotel. Broadway was a navigable canal from Shawnee Park to almost 100 feet above Barret Avenue.

In reaching that height, the river returned to the course it had run when mammoths and saber-toothed cats roamed

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